Legacies:
Poetic Living Wills


Edited by
Rob Hardy
Northfield Poet Laureate

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**Legacies: Poetic Living Wills**

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Leslie Schultz

**Chosen Work**

*for Philip Larkin and Wallace Stevens*

I must give myself as though it matters,
And so I greet this morning with a broom.
Art sings a whole from a world in tatters.

Sleep should restore me but I find it batters
With dreams of wandering from room to room,
Yet I must give myself as though it matters.

Divided, I feel madder than hatters.
I need to create but also to consume.
Art sings a whole from a world in tatters.

Could I celebrate how energy scatters
Like beads of mercury or a windblown bloom?
I must give myself as though it matters.

Even if it doesn’t, if my scheme flatters
With a false sense of order, a useless loom,
Art sings a whole from a world in tatters.

Despite the inner voice that whines and chatters
How I merely sweep a path to my own tomb,
I must give myself as though it matters.
Art sings a whole from a world in tatters.
Adriana Estill

The Gift of the Middle

Son on one side, parents on the other, I stand tall(ish)
in the middle
holding up my ends of the bargain
which weigh heavily in my hands.
I cannot let them drop.

My father refuses my arm, even as he gasps
for breath
for pulse
waits and then walks a few more steps.

My mother grasps my elbow for balance,
chafing at her need and whining
at her waning independence.

They both fight to stand upright
and when we talk politics,
our hands all clench in fists as one,
our hearts dreaming of the arc of history bending
towards justice.

Inside I’m screaming screaming screaming
at the loss of my parents which is already hap
pening which is already happening which
is already happening and I’m in the middle
of it all watching and I can’t make it
stop.

Unlike this poem. Which I can end.
But this is just the middle.

My mother’s hearing aids only aid
somewhat, and I speak louder and louder
in Spanish and English until I’m screaming
and she finally hears me and thinks I’m mad
and maybe I am
because it wasn’t always this way.

My father’s oxygen tank drags on him;
he moves less and less
and seems so much shorter than when I was young.
I stare at the age spots on his hands
and I’m afraid to ask him
what he dreams about.
These hands that held me tucked under arms
“like a football”
now tremble; nothing I do can steady them.

“This might be his last trip,” confides my mom to me,
echoing my words to my son: “This might be our last trip together.”
I watch him watch me. He sees it all: how I hold out my hand
and how I bristle at being needed. How I breathe
deeply sometimes before I answer questions. How I lack patience
and how I love love love.

I’m anticipating endings, trying to make the middle
softer; sweeter; gentler
even as I crumble under all the words stalled
between heart and throat.

I do not know how to bend this arc or judge
whether I am doing all that I can.

The problem with the middle is that it is endless
until it is not.
Leslie Schultz

_In Medias Res_

I.

Death comes always in the middle of life, appearing as the sudden cliff. I am not ready, but I am not afraid of falling or burning. I expect lamentations for a short time.

I suspect my shade will stroll, here and there, among mourners, offering faintest touch, whispers of solace. And then, quite soon, only echoes remain.

II.

I foresee that my story shifts among the generations to come, slides like a long, speckled snake through the branches of my family tree—just a glint, a flicker, a flutter of feathers, perhaps the scent of lemons or evening grass.

III.

Help me, you who are left, to inhabit fully my dying and then my death.

Through poetry I comprehend my life; through silence, my final stillness.

Now I seek to be awake to all this wonder, and to discover,

beneath fear and over pain, glad releases of farewell for body, heart, and brain.
IV.

Scatter me beside the great inland sea
where I have been so happy,
this land of spruce and apple boughs,
granite-red foxes and calling crows,
occasional flash of blue birds,
splash of waves, of purposeful oars.
Soft ash, grit of teeth and bones,
as natural as beach stones.

V.

I ask you to read my poems on the shore,
then rip the pages from my books,
touch them once with flame.

Let my words rise
to meet the stars. Mix the ashes
of my body with the ashes
of my words, perhaps adding
a wild rose or a bundle of white sage.

Let the waves, the rising tides of sea
and air, take me up or down at will:
singing, dissolved, and free.
Rob Hardy
A Legacy

to my sons

I’ve thought long and hard about what I can leave you.
After all, my greatest treasures are things I don’t possess:

the bur oak and the pasqueflower,
and the prairie grass rising
from fire each spring;

the bluebird dissolving into flight;

the clouds and the snow-pleated winter fields;

and the river that runs through the middle of this town,
that unites more than it divides us.

I have loved this place like no other,
this place which has given us you.

You came from more than one woman and one man—

You came from these people, from these fast-changing skies, these deep winters, the rise of the land that seemed, when I first came here from the east,

like a deep breath being held.

You came into a world that was changed by your presence.

You have made the hardest times lighter with the weight of your dreams.

You have lived in possibilities I could never have imagined.
You have believed there can be
more love, more voices
singing the song of their inmost heart.

You have already given me the future.
Becky Boling

It might have happened

Forgive me for passing away without calling you first. It might have happened at any time, a miscalculated step on the wooden staircase, a recalcitrant fishbone hidden in my fillet, the palpitations that without warning grip my heart and wring it into a frenzy of rat-a-tat-tats.

Forgive me that I forgot to change the sheets this week. I imagine the milk will spoil by the time you get around to clearing the fridge. Don’t sweat it. There’s more where that came from. Less of me, of course, and no remedy there.

But if you cry, and I imagine you will, on occasion, if not on the occasion—perhaps at the movies dipping your hand into the popcorn bucket or at home flipping through the list of videos streaming without anyone to ask, “Did we see this one, already?”—cry it out until your chest feels light and before your eyes swell too badly.

Remember I knew it would come—as did you—and being the cynic that I am I knew it would be inconvenient, messy, and not at all like in the movies that we most loved.

Clear me out, piece by piece, clothing and books—but keep those you like. Do-dads and whatnots can sojourn for a while, but the second-hand shop might take them off your hands. And if the memory of me is too raw, file it safe in a corner of your mind and, when ready, drag it out, turn it over and around, and know that I went, but I never left you.
Karen Herseth Wee  
*Ashes to Ashes Star to Stars*

Bury me not in the dank deep dark  
but near a stream somewhere on a day of wind  
Blow the ash of myself with your own breath and if  
you cannot find water remember

I’m made of stars  Look for me on an eerie night away from light  
the ash of me indecipherable  remember us together on earth  
breathe me in  a last goodbye before I am part of  
the Milky Way headed for the abyss of stars
Knowing

When the body is a burden how
do you say goodbye
to those who know you through it?

Who think you are what they see
or hold while you
know, you know, in every weakening clasp

that you are already outside this
feeling your way beyond
bone and sinew seeking

that thread like an egg’s anchor
that ties you to something else or

maybe I have that wrong

that unties you
from this frailing form
to become whatever unbodied thing

knows how to leave gracefully.
Mary Lewis Grow

Legacy

In the darkest part of winter, my father died.
Mind still active, body needing rest.
During final weeks, his long, lean frame lost inches, surrendered to his walker.
His hair was barely grey; his eyes and smile still shone.

Death robs, but also gives us back
A life in its entirety.
Today I may revisit any time or moment, each with valid claim.
No competition with clamoring or diminished present.

I see my father, dark-haired and tall,
Reading, talking, without slur of stroke,
Eyes twinkling as he crafted the well-turned phrase,
Thoughtful as he gave ideas and questions space.

My son, fifteen, knew but doesn’t fully know
This man – the one who wrote him stories, and holding him, held the world.
They played cards; they talked football and computers,
But fifteen sees only distance from eighty-nine.

In the church I speak about my father.
To honor him, to give him to my son.
My son stands tall and lean; his grandfather’s tweed coat fits his lanky frame.
His eyes show understanding, his feet wear my father’s shoes.
Mary Lewis Grow

**Wanted: Trip Advisor**

Our final journey can’t be that hard.
Everyone has done it: ancestors, elders,
Those who paraded the planet before us.
All reached that unknown place.

Why, then, the fear?
Is it the journey or the destination,
Distrust in our skills of navigation?
We pilgrims of adventure, we crossers of oceans and scalers of mountains,
Shrink before this one last departure.

If only we had Fodor’s or Trip Advisor to guide us.
Instead, we cling to our Lonely Planet.
Sarah Entenmann  
**My Living Will**

My soul swears that heaven is a poem  
where my body will again have symmetry.  
I'll have, once more, a breast on either side  
and a left eye with vision sharp as the right’s;  
that awful ankle will mirror the pretty one.  
My hair will be restored, glossy and thick.  
And the babe who couldn’t survive will live and thrive.

Indeed my soul, as well, is healthy in this poem.  
Peace is progressing, with healthy politics.  
Children are not denied their mother’s arms.  
Those guns are gutted of human cruelty.  
Love filters into all relationships,  
matched equally by respect and dignity.  
My soul lies peaceful, wrapped in heaven’s poetry.
Leslie Schultz
On Biography
to those I leave behind

I would write a book that cannot burn,
a book of clear-running water,
complete, with song and wisdom—stern
as my beautiful daughter.

All biography ends in death.
All lifelines run their seaward course.
Read me again, while you have breath,
until you know my secret’s source.
Audrey Kletscher Helbling

Life at Forty Degrees

Sunshine flares against a blue sky bordered by bare branches. Below, a dry maple leaf curls atop snow tinged with dirt, autumn lingering in this month of February in Minnesota. Steps away, I hang long johns on the clothesline. At forty degrees.

My hands, mottled by age spots, veins inking blue under skin, instinctively grab damp laundry, then clip. Grab and clip. There’s comfort in the familiar rhythm of this timeless task, an homage to those who came before me, who settled this land.

I imagine my grandmothers pinning clothes onto lines, defying persistent gusts of pummeling prairie winds. I hold their grit and grace within me, in these hands that generations later carry strength and determination.

Sixty-one years now I’ve lived, labored, loved. Hands on shovel, hands on stroller handles, hands on keyboard. I’ve held husband and babies and a dying father, an ailing mother. I write with these hands. Of life in prose and poetry.


I write and photograph now with hands that appear old—thin, papery skin stretched over bones and blood spidering blue. But these are strong hands still, hands that will hang more laundry on February afternoons that hold the hope of spring at forty degrees.
I walked my way to a fractured leg,
a startling finish to my tourist’s pride
in traversing London on foot, striding
freely across its thrilling histories.
Even the doctor was puzzled:
“Did you fall?” was such a refrain
that I began to make up stories.

This poem is not about me. Rather,
the precarious mechanics of the body
as they resign their symbiotic tasks –
the waving cilia of the ear and lung,
shedding skin, pulsing capillaries, stringy ligaments,
even the bacteria thronging each outpost.
They fail or rebel, and the balance falters
and the body becomes unfamiliar.

My father wonders why he has trouble walking
and the doctor replies, “You’re 91.” But he remembers
the deep reach of stride, and we remember
the thrill when he would suddenly clasp a lamppost,
fling his legs up and out and hold himself horizontal.
Even as children, we saw the whim and strength of it.

Now my leg hurts, cilia grow stiff and thin,
joints prefer not to; the body becomes Bartleby,
a balky employee prone to staring and shrugging,
and I find no force to restart that green fuse except
my father’s inspired optimism, and the vision
of his body horizontal over the sidewalk,
held by muscle and will against the inevitable call of gravity.
Penelope Duran

Remember Me, Earl

Remember me, Earl, my dear grandson,
Our endless summer, our summer of fun,
Think of happy times spent at the lake,
We skipped silver stones until very late.

Remember me resilient, remember me brave,
The stories we shared, the games we played,
Forget the pancreas, skin yellowing through,
‘Cause it never hindered my days with you.

Remember me for the things that I taught,
Like playing Go Fish and the fish we caught,
For whenever you teach a grandson to fish,
You’re granted the best, the life-saving wish.
Steven C. McCown
**Six Living Wills Hoping for Approval in the Courts**

1.
For my friends and family, another open casket brimming with unfinished poems. Take one, develop it, and complete it. Perpetuate our themes together.

2.
For a long time I have been writing a will with you, if not to you, without knowing it: my own ghostwriter, a doppelganger typing in an echoing room.

For ourselves and others we’ve sewn a shroud of words that doubles as a scarf, doubles again as an airy summer blanket, or a veil that changes colors depending on the occasion.

Truth be told, I can’t cut you from my will—nor myself from yours—even if I want to, any more than I can suppress familiar echoes.

3.
Every three months Cremation Societies send me free literature, right on time in an untimely and timeless way: a *memento mori* stuck in my slot, its bony edges jutting out.

They want my ashes, my soul in an urn. If you see me contained on a high shelf, take me down, shake me up. Scatter my words of which I am truly composed, of which we are all composed, like seeds on our common ground.
4.

I brought a book to the funeral pyre,
my student’s favorite, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*,
placed beside many offerings.

For once, a book burning
for a higher cause,
tribal belief and will expressed through flames,
purifying the dead and the living.

Words rose with her,
words I hold now and read again
in lieu of a will she was too young to write.

5.

Barbara, I want my will to sing in your hands,
a Valentine opening a song to you,
its music issuing from within,
the voice rising out of a red card
you can open and close at will.

6.

Tomorrow I will write a new living will,
and tomorrow and tomorrow.
I am determined to deliver it in person to friends and family
even I have to walk a thousand miles.
Orick Peterson

The Choice at Hand

No one can ever say it all.
What if I die this afternoon,
the most important piece left blank?
Or what if I say---this:
I choose happiness at last.

I’ve often been led astray by truth,
chasing that lying will-o-the-wisp
along bewildering dark paths.
I’ve hankered to be beautiful.
I’ve drowned myself in love, sweet love,
gasping in someone’s neediness
instead of the life of my own bright heart.
Way too often, good deeds called me
to long hours in the wilderness,
not counting steps or notching trees,
with no clearing to see the stars.

But now, the thing I choose is joy,
because of the ending I can feel ---
not tomorrow, not soon,
but at last I believe in it.
Today is like the point in a book
when the pages left are few enough
we realize nothing new can begin,
only the dangers we already know.
The heroine will die or live
with or without the hero we love,
herself intact, her gift fulfilled.

That’s how it is with me today.
My plot tangles are over now.
I’ll live out my days in my own skin,
bequeathing you the kingdom of God,
right at hand, as it always was.
Leslie Schultz
Musings at the New River Bridge
New River Gorge, West Virginia

Sooner or later, we must all cross it;
In a moment or two, we all must go
so high we brush the sun-touched clouds,
appear glorious, strange, changed before we vanish
on the other side.

This mysterious New River cuts us
gorgeously from what we know. Will we
greet old friends on the other bank? Do
they wait to embrace us? We know only

And tears. Though why should truth be cloaked
by hymnal dusts? I see diamonds dancing
in raging mist. This always-New River is
primeval, irrefutable. I hope
that on the day when I take

my high climb I shall remember to pause
at the top of the arc and look back
smiling, seeing finally all the wonder
of my life—those lovely ripples I made—
before I drop from your sight.
I am content
“…chasing the wind…”

I am content!
Time will come when no one remembers me,
   Family, friends gone, leaving not a hint!
Nothing I have done, or built, is left to see,
   Hard work, success, achievements, illusions!
I am free,
   Relieves me of confusion,
I am content.

Today, I love and hold you close,
   Dearest wife! you my brothers, sisters,
Strangers became friends giving me hope!
   Still, does not death come ever closer?
   Joyfully we make plans for tomorrow!
Confront our terror, trust in something greater,
   Accept the final loss that brings sorrow!
I am content.

Crossing through dark waters of death,
   I will forget things I left behind,
Except for when I loved without regret!
   Not when I was right! but whenever I was kind,
Working for justice with humor our human majesty.
   Moments I forgot myself the best times!
The wise man of Ecclesiastes speaks of mortal frailty,
   Be thankful, he says, “All else is vanity!”

I am content.
Toni Easterson

**Benefaction**

Should I die in the next ten minutes, say, or shortly after eating lunch, I would leave behind a messy studio, a disorganized desk, stacks of books I never got around to reading. In perpetuity would remain the words I wish I hadn’t spoken, the words I wish I’d said, the gardens unplanted and the projects incomplete. My legacy would include no riches over which my heirs might quibble, fame or genius to live on.

I may, however, be remembered for my always honoring the life outside my window, my appreciation of earth’s wild creatures just for who they are. My legacy would include a box of thank you notes received, filled bird feeders and albums stuffed to overflowing, with the photographs of friends.

And I would bequeath to society my four tall children who might carry on a personal life of kindness because those children were, and are, so greatly loved.
Leslie Schultz
Unfolding

Dawn comes rosy-red.
Sunset goes purple-blue.
In between, this day glows
with green-orange lemon hue.

So my life, I see,
arcs from light to light:
my legacy a day-span
bridging night to night.

This little space is mine
(although it’s just a breath)
to fill with joy and wonder
before my star-burst death.

As to what comes after?
What is that to me?
Keep my words and kindness—
my only legacy.
A “Gentleman's C”?  
Not good enough.  
But Bs were OK.  
“Pretty good” is almost  
“Pretty darn good”.  
Fame, wealth and Olympic gold  
Eluded me.  
But in my maturity  
I know and embrace my limits.  
Defeatist? Sour grapes?  
No - a life  
Done medium well.
Brenda Hellen  
**A Father’s Legacy**

Let me be clear: Do not die in the bed of a house where the only things that are yours stay in the basement. Do not listen to the bullshit sweet talk resurrected because you are about to die. Do not be fed by the one who cursed you daily. The food is spoiled. Before speech leaves you, tell the truth. Say:

You are cruel. I do not wish to die in your presence.

When your prayers to St. Peregrine go unanswered, and the doctors say it’s no use, when fear seems your only companion, be strong enough to accept help. Submit to the tender hands of your children. Be sure you are loved by that person dripping morphine under your tongue—there should be solace in his eyes. The hand holding yours should be more than only flesh and warmth, it should have touched you for years in unmistakable love. And finally if his voice isn’t what you listen for in between ever-distant breaths, then, please, daughter, die alone.
D. E. Green

Vacating the Premises

I hereby vacate permanently the domicile that has housed me these sixty-three (or seventy-three or eighty-three, or—god forbid!—ninety-three years), including the many improvements over the first forty years of habitation. Despite some gradual deterioration, the structure is still intact, if a bit worn, and might be refurbished for a new inhabitant. That said, it might also provide nutrients for crops, thereby supplying materiel for new bodies, to which I hereby forswear any claim, as I likewise forswear any claim to this house, which—a few intermittent calamities aside—has these many years served me so well and therewith those who have ever depended on me and who now must fend for themselves without the defense provided by this modest but eminently serviceable refuge.
The Stoics spent their lives preparing for death. Free the mind from its attachment to the things of this world, they said, and when the body dies, the mind will slip easily into oblivion. *Meditate upon the brevity of life,* says Marcus Aurelius. But I cannot be Stoic about winter’s long shadows on the snow, or the blue of this morning’s sky, or how the sun graces the prairie grass. I cannot free my mind from the love of shorelines, of moss, the scent of rosemary, even the dust motes falling like snow on the flowered wallpaper. I am attached even to the galaxy of dandelions in the lawn—how deep-rooted in darkness how splendid in the sun, and how an adoration of bees makes a blessing of their commonness. Each morning, my rickety heart is braced with the gladness of living. *Accept humbly, surrender gracefully,* says Marcus Aurelius. Accept humbly the gift of the morning, petals opening, the reconvenings of birds, the trees gathering light into their leaves. Surrender gracefully to evening, to the necessary dark and the stars’ distant remembrance of light. When I am gone, mix my ashes with seeds of prairie grass and scatter them where they will grow. Let the prairie fires consume me again in spring, let pasqueflowers and prairie smoke be my resurrection. Deface no stone with my epitaph, but let the bur oaks be my monument, and let the orioles come to sing their requiems. Do not imagine me
in some version of heaven.
You, the living, will be my afterlife.
Give away all of my possessions,
but keep the bloodroot
transfiguring the woods,
keep the migration of birds,
keep the places where there is no sound
but water running over rocks,
places far from any road where
the sundews and pitcher plants grow
unseen amid the moss.
Afterword

In February 2018, I was asked to write a poem (“Humbly, Gracefully”) to read at an event in Northfield, Minnesota, sponsored by The Convenings (https://www.theconvenings.org/), an organization that engages individuals and communities in conversations about end-of-life planning and living well while dying. At the event, I invited others to submit their own poetic “living wills.” The resulting poems deal with death and dying, with the things that make life meaningful in the face of death, and with the legacies that the poets hope to leave behind or have received from others before them.

Rob Hardy
Northfield Poet Laureate (2016-2019)

The poets retain copyright to their own work.

Acknowledgments

Leslie Schultz.


“On Biography” was originally published in Mezzo Cammin, and republished in Still Life with Poppies: Elegies (Kelsay Books 2016).

“Musings as the New River Bridge” was originally published in Still Life with Poppies: Elegies (Kelsay Books 2016).

Rob Hardy.

“A Legacy” was originally read, in a slightly different form, at a rally in support of marriage equality in Minnesota in the spring of 2012.

“Humbly, Gracefully” was written for ReConvening: Northfield (Thursday, February 8, 2018).